

Immigration Helps Make America Stronger

Should There Be a Path to Citizenship for Illegal Immigrants?

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Should there be amnesty? Should there be a path to citizenship? These questions are the wrong questions to be asking. They simply incite passions that often prevent logic and our national interest from being the guide to American immigration law and policy.

Here are the right questions: Should America have immigration laws that work instead of a convoluted system that even experts in immigration law struggle to understand? Should immigrants be permitted in the United States, and what priorities are served if they are?

Allowing American families to be together is a fundamental goal of modern immigration law. Yet, this policy is not fully accomplished by current law. For example, the son or daughter of an American citizen can wait as long as 18 years for a visa - even if that American father is a member of our armed forces serving in Afghanistan.

If you are the foreign-born wife of an American citizen, you may have to leave America for as many as 10 years if your parents brought you with them before their visas expired 20 years ago.

If you "played by the rules" and entered the U.S. with a permanent resident visa, you could wait seven years for your wife to join you.

How does keeping these families apart make America a stronger, better place?

If we examine and improve laws to reunite families, experts suggest a substantial percentage of those now simply called "illegals" would be able to comply with pro-family American immigration laws.

Another major goal of current American immigration law is to meet unmet labor needs in the U.S. Here, again, the law falls short.

A prospective employer seeking a permanent visa for a specific skilled immigrant must undergo a rigorous and costly process proving no American is available for the job. Some firms that can't get critical and highly skilled personnel approved in a timely manner move their operations to Canada or other countries where the process works more smoothly.

Unless you believe all technology geniuses are born in America, you know that immigration to the U.S. should continue. I'm glad, for instance, that American Sergey Brin, born in Russia, helped found Google in Santa Clara County, Calif. A lot of my constituents make quite a good living working for Google.

For unskilled workers, there are only 10,000 permanent visas issued per year. If, as is apparent, there is a need for more than 10,000 immigrants to pick crops, bus tables and clean offices, then current law does not meet current need in this arena, either. These jobs are a way up and out for unskilled immigrants who have big American dreams for their families. Only American pessimists have aspirations for their grandchildren to work as hard as they did in the fields.

When it comes to employment-based immigration, the American public rightly insists on a few things. First, immigrants should not displace Americans and should take jobs only where there are no Americans to do the job. Second, immigrants should not undercut the wages, hours and working conditions of Americans.

But it should not be considered "amnesty" to make it possible for families to stay together and allow employers to hire the workers they need to keep the American economy growing. These are the stated but unfulfilled goals of current immigration law.

None of the legislative proposals currently being discussed in the House or Senate are perfect. What we need are practical approaches that include:

- raising the minimum wage and vigorous enforcement of wage laws;
- immigration laws that are pro-family;
- immigration laws that meet workplace needs and are administered

efficiently and with a strong eye toward protecting the American worker;

- border enforcement on the ground that matches the rhetoric now heard on the "right"; and
- collaborative efforts with our neighbors to the south to help grow their economies and create economic opportunity for their citizens at home.

We can't have unlimited immigration. But we need practical rules that meet the needs of America.

My grandfather walked off the boat early in the last century. He came without a visa and without baggage. He didn't finish school and always spoke with a heavy accent. But he was so proud of his U.S. citizenship that he hung the framed certificate on his wall.

My father spoke no English until he went to school, but as an adult he retained only a few phrases of his first language. I speak only English, and I envy those who speak more than one language.

That's the American pattern. My grandfather was a poor immigrant with no visa and a lifetime of hard work. His granddaughter has a graduate degree and a seat in Congress.

People who don't believe America is strong - so strong that this American pattern will continue - have insufficient faith in our country. I believe in America and the strong America that immigrants built. Let's not ruin a good thing with angry rhetoric and misguided laws.

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